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The fascination of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon lies in its subversion of all expectations. In a book so entitled, whose characters are Pilate, Hagar, Jacob, Reba, Magdalene, Ruth, First Corinthians, and Solomon, one would expect a Biblical allegory. The author joyously subverts that expectation, gaily frustrating all searches for her onoma in Biblical concordances. In doing this, she is making a comment on the Black use of the white Book. By stressing the self-referentiality of her names, she protects the integrity of her fiction. It can only be explicated in its own terms, not on ours.

The semantic opacity of the names has to do with the way in which they were selected. They are lexically opaque, because they were "picked blind." The author's ma-

ternal grandparents were destitute sharecroppers in Alabama who named their daughter "Rahmah" in this way.[1] It was the custom for the father to open the Scriptures at random and allow his finger to travel the page so exposed. Whatever configuration of letters it stopped on, regardless of their meaning, was conferred upon the newborn child. So Toni Morrison's mother was called "Rahmah," a Hebrew word meaning "height." That this is used several times in the Bible for a Palestinian town in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, a hilltop village about five miles north of Jerusalem, is totally irrelevant.[2] That it is the place where Rachel, the mother of Benjamin and Joseph, weeps for her sons, evocative though it may be, was not taken into consideration. It was an aesthetic choice, determined only by the shape of the word, not by its connotations.

The protagonist's father, meditating on the name he has just transmitted to his only son, thinks:

> "He had cooperated as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every child other than the first male. And

> abided by whatever the finger pointed to, for . . . he knew every configuration of the naming of his sister. How his father, confused and melancholy over his wife's death in childbirth, had thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely and protective way over a row of smaller trees. How he had copied the group of letters out on a piece of brown paper; copied, as illiterate people do, every curlicue, arch, and bend in the letters, and presented it to the midwife."(18)

That the mode of naming in the novel corresponds to historical fact invites a sociological interpretation of the names. This critical strategy has the advantage of illuminating the chronicle structure of the narrative as a three-generational saga of a black family. In each generation, a different naming mode was practised, and thereby is foregrounded the changing status of the Blacks in American society.

The four categories of names employed in the novel have geographic and economic implications. Besides encoding locality and proprietory claims, they also bespeak self-image and establish chronology. The name "Solomon" which the hero retrieves for himself and returns to his family, is that of his great-grandfather. He is said to have flown, literally, like a black eagle, out of the cotton fields, away from his slave master, back to his home in Africa. Typically, slaves had no surnames.[3] The second class consists of post-Civil-War rural southern names. The protagtonist's best friend categorizes these as "nigger" names. The third group are those who moved north to find jobs in the cities and had names imposed upon them by the white officials. The northward migration began just before the first World War and resulted in the imposition of "colored" names. "Employers required full names. Conscripts in the army had to settle on a permanent surname which, upon marriage, became a hereditary family name. Social Security laws were most effective in stabilizing the colored man's name."[4]

In the fourth, and final category, are the Black militant names adopted as an aspect of racial politics by those involved in the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties. Rejecting the epithets : Negro and Colored, they call themselves Afro-Americans. Their nomenclature does not reflect the white Scripture, nor does it reflect the white bureaucracy registering names in the Freedman's Bureau. Their rejection of all European names is an assertion of autonomy. It is a rejection of colonialism and exploitation. It is a repudiation of psychological control.[5] Because the author delights in subverting all expectations, she expends considerable imaginative energy in demonstrating that Class IV is as enslaved as Class I had been.

The theme of the novel is that a human being can transcend his circumstances. This is represented metaphorically in the legend of Solomon's flight. This is represented onomastically in Pilate's impossible, cross-gender name. She wears it as an adornment, suspended in a glittering brass box on her left earlobe. She rises,

in serene self-possession, above the murderous associations of her name. Because it had been given to her in love, she accepts it as a jewel, and by her life, redeems its negative aspects. Just as her powerful contralto soars over the gathered crowd in the opening pages, so does her spirit soar. "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly." (340)

Among the feminine Class I names, which were "picked blind" from the Bible, are those of the protagonist's sisters: Magdalene and First Corinthians; and of his cousins: Reba (the shortened form of Rebecca) and Hagar. The names have no religious significance because they derive from the sortilege of the illiterate. This mode of selection protects the lexical opacity of the names. Since they were chosen, not for their sound, but for their shape on the page, they cannot be semantically analyzed. Pilate's father chose for her what looked to him like a row of trees. When the midwife protested that it was not only a man's name, and therefore inappropriate for a baby girl, but the hated name of him who had sentenced Jesus,

he stubbornly declared himself unaffected either by the denotation or the connotation. All he said was, "That's where the finger stopped," as if a will, greater than his own, to which he must submit, had determined the choice.

After emancipation became effective January 1, 1863, the Union Army set up Freedman's Registers where every negro had his name recorded. As subject to clerical errors as any bureaucratic machinery, it resulted in botched and corrupted names like that of the protagonist's: Macon Dead. A drunken white clerk, faced by the ex-slave, Jake Solomon, put down his mumbled answers in the wrong spaces. Asked where he had come from, he had answered, "Macon." This was scrawled in the slot for the first name. Asked, "Father?" he had answered, "Dead." This had been entered in the blank for the last name. When someone told him what had been done to him, he did not protest the false nomenclature. He justified his passivity with the rationalization that it was one way of beginning anew. Perhaps the heavy name would, at least, obliterate his slave past.

For three generations, this name has been trans-

mitted to the only son. Macon Dead,II, thinks that:

> "Surely...he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs asstraight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth, with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name...His own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less. Agreed to take and pass on to all their issue this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army. A literal slip of the pen...which his father handed on to his only son." (18)

And now, he himself, who had inherited it, had once again allowed it to be handed on. How Macon Dead, III finally sheds this hated name on his dangerous quest back to his ancestral home where he recovers the magical name of Solomon in a song, is the plot of the novel.

The mordant puns to which the name lends itself are played with bitterly. "Someone should have shot him." "What for? He was already Dead." (89) They are angered by the resignation with which he accepted it. This resignation to "nigger" names is explained as follows:

> "What's your trouble? You don't like your name?...
> Let me tell you somethin, baby. Niggers get their
> Names the way they get everything else---the best
> way they can. The best way they can." (88)

The obsolete epithet, "colored," which characterizes the Class III names, establishes its own chronology as prior to the civil rights movement of the sixties. In the first half of this century, there was a great migration to the urban north. The author's own family left the rural south in 1912 and finally ended in the dismal industrial town of Lorain, Ohio, which is the setting for her first two novels. Her hard-working father, George Wofford, was a shipwelder who simultaneously held down three jobs to earn the money to send her to Howard University. It was while she was in college, touring the south with an acting company, that she first saw the farm that had been

taken away from her grandfather.[6]

The criterion of a "real name" given in the beginning of the novel was that it should be "given at birth with love and seriousness." (18) This criterion is violated by the many colored names catalogued by the hero at the end. In the pool halls and the barbershops of the cities are men named: Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State, Jelly Roll, Fats, Lead-belly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Washboard, Gatemouth, Shine, Jim the Devil, etc. (333-4) These are derogatory nicknames which they give to one another. These are "names they got from yearnings, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses." (333) Rather than having been given "with love and seriousness," they have been given satirically to point out flaws and foibles, jokingly to ridicule weaknesses, scoffingly to expose failures, tauntingly to shame and embarrass. These are not names to live up to, but names to be lived down. Often they are privative, like Guitar's. He was not called that because he could play one, but because he wished he could. Usually they are caricatures which stress some prominent feature. It is in this selection of a single aspect, at the exclusion

of the whole man, that they are dehumanizing. The lack of a surname indicates their marginality. Not permitted to do any real work by a society which refuses them access to any meaningful employment, their childish nicknames reflect their immature status. They have internalized the negative images of their oppressors. Their low self esteem is reflected in their nomenclature.

"Milkman"is evocative of disgust and uneasiness. He retained the epithet given to him by Freddie the janitor all his life. One afternoon, Freddy had watched through the window as his mother nursed him when he was already a grown boy in knickers. He burst into the house with, "A milkman. That's what you got here. A regular milkman if I ever seen one," and spread the news all over town. Milkman's retarded maturing becomes a metaphor for the condition of the colored man in the first half of this century.

In the sixties a fourth mode of naming arose from racial politics. The Black militants began to name themselves. Repudiating European forms, they adopted African ones. This is fictionalized by Guitar's transformation into the Sunday Man. He enlists in a group which calls

itself. The Weeks. Sworn to forgo any personal life, they discipline themselves to toughness by giving up intoxicants and stimulants, and human relationships. Their sole aim is to avenge crimes against the Blacks by executing whites. They choose an anonymous victim for their retaliations and assassinate him in a similar way, whispering, just before they commit the murder, "Your Day has come." The ironies of such revenge are that their brutality dehumanizes them. Masked behind the anonymity of their assumed names is a hatred so consuming that it enslaves them to a fate far worse than that suffered by their slave ancestors. Guitar says he has given up the last name, Baines, "because that was the slave-master's name." He fails to perceive the irony that he has become his own slave-master. Because he needs money to buy explosives for his latest assignment, he joins Milkman in his search for a bag of gold left in a cave where Pilate and her brother hid after their father was murdered. Because of his obsession with killing, he misinterprets Milkman's behavior, fails to read the signs of his finally awakening to love and full adulthood, and thinking himself cheated, he stalks him to

death, and shoots Pilate over her father's grave. The ironies of this closure are that the hero had just found his kinship group and been reborn through their acceptance of him as a Solomon in the town of Shalimar (which they pronounce Shalimonee) named after his great-grandfather and populated entirely by his descendants. This is the traditional final naming which "completes the birth."[7] For 31 years he had been called Macon Dead, III, and now that he had earned the right to be called by his true name, Solomon, his spirit could finally fully inhabit his body. His oedipal difficulties had been signalled by a limp. He imagined that his left leg was one-half inch shorter than his right. When he survives his initiation in the night hunt on Solomon's Leap, and successfully proves himself a man, suddenly he finds that he no longer limps. He felt "joy in walking the earth as if his legs were stalks." (284) This simile recalls the metaphor his father had used. "Surely he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who

had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness." (18) Recovering that name has effected a kind of reincarnation. In African tradition, one is not considered a person until one has been named. The infant is designated "it" or "thing" until it has proved that it will survive. If its viability is doubtful, the neuter designation continues until it can be determined whether or not the spirit chooses to inhabit this body. If its vitality flickers, it is never named, but is considered to have been still born when it dies. Toni Morrison fictionalized this tradition by forcing her hero to stand on his own two feet before he can discard the designation "Dead" for his "true name." And this final naming completes his birth. That his name comes from his great-grandfather also conforms to African tradition, because "the name is first whispered into the newborn's ear by an elderly person who is going to where the neonate just came from." [8]

Another corollary of this is the way in which the characters are introduced in this novel. In the first

chapter Pilate's name is never used. She is called "the singing woman." Her sister-in-law is designated "the dead doctor's daughter" and "the rose petal lady." Mrs. Bains is called only "the stout woman." Her grandson is never mentioned by name. He is identified only by the color of his eyes. He is called "the cat-eyed boy" or the tall boy whose "eyes were gashes of gold" or the one whose eyes were "gilded by sun." These associations prepare us for his transformation into "The Sunday Man." The protagonist's father is introduced, not by name, but by his obsession with ownership: "the propertied negro." It prefigures the advice he later gives his son: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too." (55) His Midas-curse is exemplified by the name his enemies coin for his Packard: Macon Dead's hearse. The office from which he evicts the tenants who cannot pay his rents still has the name of the previous owner painted on the window. The wife he hates, whom he married for her father's money, is still called by her father's name, either "the doctor's daughter" or Ruth Foster, as if he were an absence, or a nega-

tive presence.

Five times, in the opening pages, Pilate is called "the singing woman," and the song she sings, which gives the novel its name, encodes the hero's genealogy. Her powerful contralto rises from the edge of a crowd watching a man trying to fly from the cupola of Mercy Hospital. She sings, "Sugarman done fly away / Sugarman done gone." Later, he recognizes Pilate's tune as the chorus of a children's circle game. The melody which they chant, as they dance, is the same, only the name is different. Instead of "Sugarman" they sing "Solomon." As he unriddles the verses, he discovers that Jake, the 21st son, who was raised in a red man's house, was his grandfather, brought up by the Indian, Hetty Byrd, who ran off with her daughter, Singing Byrd, who was the mother of Pilate and Macon. Through patient field research, questioning every survivor he can find, taking oral testimonies, he pieces together his personal history, the clues to which he had found preserved in folklore. He learns that Rynah was the wife whom Solomon left with 21 sons, who died of grief. The

valley beside Solomon's Leap has been named Rynah's Gulch because when the wind blows over it the sound is like a woman's voice sobbing. The song which had been his annunciation in the beginning of the novel, becomes her eulogy at the end. As Pilate is dying in his arms, she begs him to sing. Although he cannot carry a tune, he needs to express his love in her terms, so he alters the name in Rynah's dirge once more, to mourn:

"Sugargirl don't leave me here,
Cotton balls to choke me.
Sugargirl don't leave me here,
Buckra's arms to yoke me." (340)

With the economy of great art, the song of Solomon can function as blues, lullabye, love song, singing game, and riddle. But in spite of its multiple significations, defined, in each case, by the contexts, aspects of it remain inexplicable. The enigmatic "Buckra" is never decoded. The undecipherable name, preserved in the folksong, remains a mystery to tease some future onomastician.

Milkman, elated by the discovery of his real name, becomes fascinated by all names.

> "He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, "michi gami," How many dead names and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as "Macon Dead," recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people." (333)

The paradigm for the persistence of the orally transmitted version of a name over the one in a written text is stated in the first paragraph of the novel. The truth conveyed by folklore always outlives its distortions "in some dusty file." The postoffice had declared that the street on which Dr. Foster lived was called Mains Avenue. In tribute to his having made it through medical school, everyone called the street on which he lived, "Doctor Street." In doing so, they were paying their respects "to the first colored man of consequence in that city." White officialdom refused to recognize the name. Town

maps continued to list it as Mains Avenue. Directives were posted all over the neighborhood insisting that Mains Avenue is not Doctor Street. The Blacks, seeing this in print, felt vindicated, and justified their usage by calling it Not Doctor Street. So, in 1931, the protagonist is born on Not Doctor Street.

The power of folklore is manifested in other ways. He was conceived by means of a love-potion concocted by Pilate to be given to her brother who has yet no male issue to perpetuate their name. His angry attempts to abort it are stopped by a magic voodoo doll she leaves on his chair. Pilate's mythic stature and her enchantments are collated in a series of tree images which correlate with her name. Her father had envisioned the name as a row of trees. The first time Guitar leads Milkman to her house, she seems to them to be a tall, black tree, "They wanted to go inside the wine house of the lady who had one earring, no navel, and looked like a tall black tree." (36) As she cooks the wine "Pilate swayed like a willow over her stirring." (30) Four huge pine trees shade

her house. She had, as a girl, loved to chew pine needles, "and as a result smelled even then like a forest." (27) As her grand-daughter, Hagar, lies dying of unrequited love, her mother, Reba, and her grandmother, Hagar, lean over her like trees. "Pilate and Reba, seated beside the bed, bent over her like two divi-divi trees beaten forward by a wind always blowing from the same direction. Like the trees, they offered her all they had: love murmurs and a protective shade." (318-9)

The subtle name magic evoked here in the lyrical descriptions of a being as tall as a tree, whose breath is the scent of the forest, whose movements are those of a tree blown in the wind, whose presence is sheltering and nurturing, whose generosity is as unquestioning as a tree's bearing fruit, who is as elemental as nature, all of these attributes were predestined in her name which had been chosen for her because it was shaped like a tree.

When the protagonist has his epiphany, he is leaning against a tree in the dark on top of Solomon's Leap. He is "cradled in the tree roots as if on his grandfather's

lap." (284) There, at his most vulnerable moment, alone on the ground, surrounded by enemies, with nothing to help him, not his money, nor his car, nor his father's reputation, not even his suit, or his shoes, he begins to understand the meaning of his life. He realizes that both his father and Guitar had been scarred for life when they saw their fathers killed. He comprehends how his mother had been maimed by her mother's death. As a long moan sounds from Rynah's Gulch, he has a vision of Hagar bending over him in perfect love and is flooded with guilt for having abandoned her. At that moment of perfect awareness he becomes conscious of the nobility of Pilate, the only one able to transcend her own pain. She slept without sheets, in a house without a door, walked in shoes without laces, was without a single comfort, yet she had attained absolute serenity. Suddenly he feels ready to assume responsibility for his life. The new name which crowns his individuation, Solomon, derives from a Canaanite deity meaning "completion, fulfillment." The signification "wholeness" renders his new found autonomy. [9]

The irony is that these belated insights come just as Hagar is dying of grief, and a wire is being tightened around his own neck. These are compounded by further ironies, onomastic in nature. The generosity and largeness of spirit that he encountered throughout the south made him wonder why Blacks ever left. Everywhere he finds hospitality, except in Shalimar, Virginia, which he regarded as his ancestral home. Here, where he expected the warmest welcome of all, they tried to kill him. Here, among his relatives, because he had failed to introduce himself, they were incited to murder. His car had broken down in front of Solomon's Store. When he mentioned to the men lounging inside that he might have to buy a new one, they glare at him with hatred. Everything he says aggravates their hostility, until one of them pulls out a knife and gashes him. He realizes afterwards that what provoked this crisis was his failure to tell them his name and to ask them theirs. "He hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names and believed himself too good to tell them his." (269) He had provoked their ire by treating them "as if they were anonymous niggers."

It is not until he has proved his manhood by being tested to the limit of his endurance on the midnight wildcat hunt that he exchanges names with his kinsmen and they accept him into the tribe of Solomon. He returns north to give Pilate back the "real" name they share, and then drives her home to this community to bury her father's bones in a shallow grave they dig together on Solomon's Leap. They discuss what marker they will put over the grave. She consecrates it with her name.

> "She reached up and yanked her earring from her ear, splitting the lobe. Then she made a little hole with her fingers and placed in it Sing's snuffbox with the single word Jake ever wrote." (339)

No novel has explored more profoundly the magic inherent in naming, nor grounded that more deeply in history.

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NOTES

[1] Colette Dowling, "The Song of Toni Morrison," The New York Times Magazine, May 20, 1979, p. 41.

[2] John L. Mckenzie, S. J., Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1965), p. 720. Ramah is mentioned in Jos. 18:25; Ne. 11:33; Jgs. 19:13.

[3] Elsdon C. Smith, American Surnames (Philadelphia: Childton Book Co.,1969),p. 273. "While still slaves, few Negroes needed, or had family names."

[4] Ibid.,p. 276.

[5] On this point, see: Miles Newbell Puckett, Black Names in America (Boston: Hall, 1975); and J. L. Dillard, Black Names (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

[6] Dowling's interview shows that "Lincoln's Heaven" is autobiographical. The author's great-grandmother, an Indian, had been given the land during Reconstruction by the government. The grandfather, who inherited it, couldn't read, so he was tricked into putting his mark on some papers which deeded the land to whites.

In the novel, these "legal entanglements" are described on p. 53. Singing Bird, or Sing, who marries Jake Solomon, is a fictionalized version of the Indian ancestor.

The practise of naming after admired whites figures here. The good horse, called President Lincoln, the foal, Mary Todd, the cow, Ulysses S. Grant.(52)

[7] Ogonna Chuks-Orji, Names From Africa: Their Origin, Meaning, and Pronunciation (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1972), p. 76.

[8] Ibid., p. 77.

[9] The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia Identifying and Explaining All Proper Names (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p.621.